

# Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is making the Green New Deal a 2020 litmus test

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The Green New Deal ricocheted into America's political consciousness in record time.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who drew attention to climate change during a [sit-in at House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office](#) before she was even sworn in, is releasing a [formal resolution in the House](#) this week outlining her exact policy proposal for the Green New Deal — an ambitious idea that aggressively tackles climate change to reduce carbon emissions in the next 10 years. It also includes plans for universal health care and a significant expansion of the social safety net.

“The major thing here is to define it before other people get to define it for her,” said Waleed Shahid, spokesman for the [Justice Democrats](#). “As multiple 2020 candidates say they support the Green New Deal, our movement is going to be defining it to ensure that what these candidates are calling for is a World War II-style mobilization of our economy.”



Sunrise Movement protesters gather near the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to ask her to support the Green New Deal.

*Michael Brochstein/SOPA*

*Images/LightRocket via Getty Images*

Behind the scenes, Ocasio-Cortez and her allies have been mobilizing a campaign to get House Democrats and 2020 presidential candidates to sign onto it — not just in vague platitudes of support, but throwing their weight behind the specifics of the deal.

“Once this resolution is announced, there will be a really clear litmus test for what they support,” said Stephen O’Hanlon, spokesman for climate activist group Sunrise Movement.

But there’s something larger at work here. The Green New Deal is fundamentally about making climate change a central Democratic priority in 2020 — without shoving aside health care and the economy. After years of this globally important issue languishing on the national agenda, it has come roaring back.

## **What is the Green New Deal?**

Until now, the Green New Deal has been more of an idea than an actual policy. This week, an Ocasio-Cortez resolution is set to make its debut. The plan prioritizes climate change, but its strength lies in its symbolic ties to one of the Democratic party’s biggest historical successes: the

original New Deal under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

As historian Eric Rauchway recently wrote [in the Washington Post](#), FDR's vision for the 1932 New Deal in many ways was a "green" New Deal that included a significant social justice component. FDR's plan included sustainable ways to shape the nation's waterways and agriculture, trying to ensure there wouldn't be another Dust Bowl, the severe drought that came about from poor farming practices.

But as Rauchway writes, FDR's social justice idealism fell by the wayside as the president had to compromise to get things done quickly. This could be a lesson for politicians who want to make the second version; the speed and scale required could create problems for marginalized communities.



Former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the campaign trail in 1932, talking to American farmers about the New Deal, his sweeping infrastructure proposal.

*Universal History Archive/Getty Images*

Activists were clearly inspired by this. Our original guide for what the Green New Deal looks like lies in a [working document](#) that called for the formation of a House Select Committee for a Green New Deal (ultimately, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi agreed to a select committee on climate change, but it did not go as far as progressives hoped).

The Green New Deal's biggest goal is making the United States carbon neutral by 2030 and turning the country into a global leader in renewable energy in the process. This would be a massive transformation; the document calls for the country to upgrade every residential and industrial building to be energy efficient, and completely cut fossil fuel emissions from major industries and US infrastructure.

[The document](#) reads a bit like a progressive manifesto: In addition to calling for the United States to generate 100 percent of its power demand through renewable sources like wind and solar by the year 2030, it also calls for progressive programs like Medicare for all, a jobs guarantee program, and a universal basic income. And though the actual resolution is expected to focus more on energy and environmental issues, the

basic structure will likely be similar.

Rather than trying to incentivize private business to change its practices, the plan is calling for significant involvement from the federal government for a solution to climate change that's both broad enough to meet the scale and fast enough to respond to devastating impacts like sea level rise, drought, fires, and major storms that we are already seeing.

"The level of investment required will be massive," the document reads. "The speed of investment required will be massive. Even if all the billionaires and companies could make the investments required, they would not be able to pull together a coordinated response in the narrow window of time required to jump-start major new projects and major new sectors."

As Vox's Dave Roberts wrote in his [in-depth explainer](#) of the plan:

As we will see, the exact details of the GND remain to be worked out, but the broad thrust is fairly simple. It refers, in the loosest sense, to a massive program of investments in clean-energy jobs and infrastructure, meant to transform not just the energy sector, but the entire economy. It is meant both to decarbonize the economy and to make it fairer and more just.

**Why climate change feels urgent now**

If climate change were one of the central policy agenda items among Democrats in this presidential election cycle, it would be a noticeable departure from the past.

Democrats have talked about climate change as the most important issue out there for some time, but there has been seemingly little urgency in Congress to take action. The last large bill House Democrats passed to address climate change was the American Clean Energy and Security Act, a cap-and-trade bill that passed the House in 2009; it failed in the Senate. Former President Barack Obama's signature climate policy was the [Clean Power Plan](#); he also joined the international Paris climate agreement. President Donald Trump has undone both of those actions, pulling the US out of the Paris deal and [attempting to roll back](#) the Clean Power Plan.



President Trump announces his decision for the US to pull out of the Paris climate agreement at the White House on June 1, 2017.

*Win McNamee/Getty Images*

Climate change has been at risk of falling off the agenda permanently — and many conservative groups and leaders (including the [current president](#)) love to inject doubt whenever the US is hit with cold temperatures on the [well-established fact](#) that climate change is real and caused by humans.

With Republicans controlling the House and Senate for the first two years of Trump's presidency, climate change wasn't taken seriously on Capitol Hill at all.

"We weren't even allowed to hold hearings on the issue or things that would contribute to carbon reduction," said Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "The Republicans were a total roadblock for us even talking about climate change. They don't believe in it. Well, some of them do, but their leadership and the president certainly don't."

But as [Vox's Umair Irfan](#) has written, there are signs that bold ideas to address the crisis are now more welcome. With recent hurricanes, droughts, and raging wildfires all clearly exacerbated by global warming, people are experiencing the effects of climate change for themselves, and more people are getting concerned.

A recent nationally representative poll from Yale University and George Mason University found 69 percent of Americans are “somewhat worried” about climate change and 29 percent are “very worried,” the highest those numbers have ever been.

As Irfan [writes](#):

The United States saw [billions of dollars](#) in damages and dozens of deaths last year as rising temperatures increased the damages from extreme events. These disasters helped make the somewhat abstract warming of the planet tangible in people’s minds.

In other words, the time is now for climate activists and their allies in Congress to make their case for action.

## **How AOC and activist groups plan to push this policy in the House**

The coalition — made up of Sunrise Movement, Justice Democrats, and Ocasio-Cortez herself has already gotten [about 40 members of Congress](#) to sign onto an effort pushing for the creation of a select committee on a Green New Deal to hash out the details of the lofty idea.

That didn’t pan out as hoped; while Pelosi agreed to the creation of a select committee on climate change, it wasn’t as powerful as other committees that have subpoena power — something Ocasio-

Cortez and progressive groups wanted. And House leadership has made no commitments yet on actually taking up a Green New Deal resolution when it is released.

When the resolution is released, activists plan to go back to every House member and senator who supported the select committee and get them to back Ocasio-Cortez's updated plan.

"For people who have supported the select committee, we're not assuming any of them support the resolution," O'Hanlon said.

Even some members who say they support the idea of a Green New Deal say they are wary of signing onto support Ocasio-Cortez's resolution without know exactly what the proposal contains.

"I won't sign on before I see it," DeFazio said.



Sunrise Movement protestors gather outside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's (D-CA) office on December 10, 2018.  
*Michael Brochstein/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images*

Some 2020 Democrats have also been cautious about a full-throated endorsement. While the Green New Deal has been endorsed by declared or potential candidates including [Kamala Harris](#), [Bernie Sanders](#), [Kirsten Gillibrand](#), [Mike Bloomberg](#), and [Cory Booker](#), exactly what that means is fuzzy. Staff for 2020 contender Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) told Axios she supports the "idea" of a Green New Deal.

The fact this proposal is a catch-all of the most progressive programs means it probably isn't going anywhere in the House, where House Energy and Commerce Chair Frank Pallone has already called the plan too ambitious and unlikely to generate consensus among moderate Democrats in the House, never mind the Senate.

"The goal of trying to reduce fossil fuels and get to a carbon neutral economy is important and something that I agree with," Pallone told the Asbury Park Press last month. "The Green New Deal says you can do it in 10 years. I don't know if that's technologically feasible. ... Beyond that it's probably not politically feasible."

But to Ocasio-Cortez and Green New Deal backers, that's not the point. They are banking that the idea will keep spreading. Even some in the House who are skeptical of whether the plan is feasible agree

that the branding of the Green New Deal — harkening back to the days of FDR — is a brilliant marketing strategy.

## **The Green New Deal is becoming a progressive litmus test**

Progressives are clearly using the Green New Deal to push the debate in their direction. The left wants to make sure they have fully vetted and influenced the ideas of any Democrats that have a shot at winning the White House.

If Democrats take back the White House and the Senate in 2020 — a big though not impossible if — activists want to have bills ready to go in 2021 to tackle climate change. Realistically, the bills that come out of the House in the next two years probably won't be as bold as the proposal Ocasio-Cortez is floating.

Justice Democrats and the Sunrise Movement are clear: They won't support a candidate for president that won't back the Green New Deal. They're aided by the fact that many 2020 contenders already support Medicare for All, and many — including Booker, Harris, and Sanders — have already floated some of the other components of a Green New Deal: a universal basic income and jobs guarantee.

But activists won't be totally satisfied until 2020 candidates do two things: embrace Ocasio-Cortez's plan and pledge not to take fossil fuel money.

“We’re focusing on getting all the 2020 contenders to endorse the full vision of the Green New Deal and get specific about it,” O’Hanlon said. “All of the 2020 candidates need to know that if they want to be taken seriously by young people, they need to reject fossil fuel money and back the Green New Deal.”



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Green New Deal supporters held a demonstration to encourage House Democratic Caucus Chair Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) to support the deal in Brooklyn, New York, on February 4, 2019.

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